THE CITY

April 12, 1992

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Luke 19:28-48

"As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it,..."
-Luke 19:41 (NRSV)

It is an ancient tradition of the church that the palms which are given to church-goers on Palm Sunday are saved for most of a year. In the homes of my friends who attended Catholic or Lutheran or some other fancy church, those palms were placed behind a picture frame in the sitting room where they became progressively more yellow and brittle. And then, according to custom, they are to be collected and burned. The ashes from the palms of Palm Sunday are then used to smudge a cross on the forehead of believers on Ash Wednesday.

The tradition is preserved and maintained by the Roman Catholic Church. We called over to Holy Name Cathedral this week and asked, and they said, "Yes, indeed; palms are burned and the ashes used on Ash Wednesday."

It's a good tradition. It's one of those eloquent gestures which we Protestants have left to the Roman Catholics, and we are the poorer for it. In fact, in one of the churches I served, we tried it on Ash Wednesday and a few Presbyterians found it mean-ingful; although I confess that I could not rid myself of the distinct sense that my militant Presbyterian Scotch-Irish grand-
mother was rolling her eyes in heaven and saying, "Really, now, is that necessary?"

It's a good tradition. We need the reminder - from palms to ashes to cross. The late William Stringfellow, an attorney who became one of the most articulate theologians of our era, used to worry a lot about Palm Sunday. We come to church on Palm Sunday, he used to say, because we love a parade. And we miss the power, the tragedy and the drama. For Jesus, Stringfellow pointed out, it was a day of serious temptation and difficult decision. He was tempted when his friends and the crowd started treating him like royalty, waving palm branches, the symbol of Israel's patri-otic aspiration, and chanting:

"Blessed is the King
Who comes in the name of the Lord!"

which was the equivalent of the U.S. Marine Corps Band playing "Ruffles and Flourishes," and "Hail to the Chief." When all that started to happen on the outskirts of the capital, Jesus, accord-ing to Stringfellow and many others, was authentically tempted to go for it, to claim

the ancient throne of David, to rally the zealots, put the hated Romans to the sword, and declare independ-ence, reestablish the old monarchy.

And so when the city comes into view for the first time on the road down from the Mount of Olives, and Jesus stops the procession, looks at the city, its wall and rooftops reflecting the morning sun, what he doesn't say is stunning.

He weeps. This is not eyes moistening slightly. This is real weeping. This is a lament which the Biblical scholars define "a voice of love and profound caring, a vision of what could have been and of grief over its loss of personal responsi-bility and frustration, of sorrow and anger mixed." [Luke, Interpretation, Fred Craddock, p. 229]

So in this moment, it is Jesus powerfully expressing love and hope and grief and letting go of perhaps his greatest tempta-tion, to take control and lead the nation - the city. It is Jesus, choosing love and service and sacrifice over power and control and authority.

And he says:

> "If you only know the things that make for peace.
> But they are hidden from your eyes. The day will
> come when your enemies will crush you."

And that, of course, is what happened. At least four dec-ades elapsed between this day and Luke writing it down. And by the time Luke wrote, there had been a number of armed insurrec-tions until in 70 A.D. the Romans had enough of it, devastated the city, leveled the Temple, and dispersed the Jews. So in a terribly historical way, Jesus was exactly right when he said amidst his weeping, that the city was blind.

And then, of course, he went straight to the Temple and what he did then was very significant. He didn't say prayers or make a sacrifice; he became angry at the corruption of the sacrificial system, and he physically ejected the profiteers; and then he sat down to teach and heal and listen and encourage all the sorts of people who ordinarily weren't in the Temple. It was an act, most agree, that guaranteed his execution. [See John Dominic Crossan, The Historical Jesus X11]

There is much more going on here than the parade. Frederick Buechner reflects:

> "He looked at the city and wept. The palm branch-
> es. The hosannas. Triumph and hope and healing
> were what the shouting was about that day, and if
> Palm Sunday services are any more than ecclesias-
> tical jamborees, liturgical vaudeville, it's
> because some echo of that shouting is with us
> still." [A Room Called Remember, p. 74]

There is much more going on here than the parade. There is first of all, the simple fact that he came to the city. I dis-covered an absolutely delightful detail in a new and highly regarded book by DePaul's John Dominic Crossan, distinguished scholar. Crossan says there was a superstition among the rural peasants of Galilee in the first century that "the most

powerful demons are not found in small villages but in certain cities." Professor Crossan suggests that when Jesus exorcised a demon, the people might have concluded that the demon headed for Jerusalem.
[Ibid, X1]

Not a bad metaphor, actually. I know people who think like that. In fact the thought occurs to me - as I ponder a rush hour trip to O'Hare - that some very real demons have found their way to the city recently.

He came to the city. He wept because the city was blind, and to observe this day with integrity is to ask what it is we see when we look at the city; or to shift the image slightly, what it is we hear when we turn our ear to our city.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra, I hope! And the Lyric Opera and Music of the Baroque and the Blues and Jazz at Andy's and "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" at the seventh inning stretch, and the Fourth Presbyterian Church Morning Choir... But there are other voices; voices which, if you have the courage to hear, will make you weep.

Pharoah and Lafeyette Rivers, for instance, the boys in Alex Kotowitz's, There Are No Children Here , about life in a Chicago public housing project. Bird Leg, their friend, fifteen is dead, shot on a playground on a hot August night, by a rival gang member. At the funeral Pharoah and Lafeyette are sitting in a pew with their family. Someone sang, "Lean On Me."

> "Large tears slid down Pharoah's plump cheeks. He clutched his rolled-up sweatshirt to his chest for security.
>
> "As the service closed and the mourners moved forward to pass the casket, Pharoah, still gripping his balled-up sweatshirt, asked Lafeyette, 'What's up in heaven? Do they have stores?'
>
> "'Shut up,' Lafeyette said. 'You don't know what you're talking about.'
>
> "As the boys waited to file out, they heard a mother, two rows back, scold her son, 'That could have been you if I'd let you go over there.'
>
> "'We're gonna die one way or the other by killing or plain out,' James said to Lafeyette. 'I just wanna die plain out.' Lafeyette nodded. 'Me too.'" [p. 48-51]

Or hear the voice of Nikkeye, who is seventeen and lives in Camden, New Jersey and has been a prostitute since she was thir-teen. Time featured Camden in its January 20, 1992 issue in an article entitled "Who Could Live Here?" Camden, a once thriving industrial center is a gutted, flattened city of 100,000, half under twenty-one with 200 liquor stores, no

theaters, where you can buy a hand grenade for $400 on the street and where infants die at twice the natural average, which means at Third World rate or worse. Nikkeye told Time:

> "I been stabbed, raped, stomped, kidnapped and beaten up. The only thing that's never happened to me is - I never died. I figure I know every-thing there is to know. I probably know more than the President. I don't know how to ride a bike. I've never been to a zoo."

Or hear the voice of the Rev. Johnny Ray Youngblood, Pastor of St. Paul Community Baptist Church, Brooklyn, at the funeral of Ian Moon, one of the two young men shot and killed in the hallway of their high school. Mr. Youngblood's eulogy, which was re-printed on the editorial page of The New York Times quoted Mayor Dinkins:

> "'The Mayor said something that shook me,' the minister remarked. 'He said Ian has gone to be with God. That's frightening because if Ian is with God, what is he going to tell God about us when he gets there?'"

The first thing and perhaps the most important thing about this day is that Jesus came to the city and loved it enough to know its promise, and enough to hope for its future, loved enough to weep over it. And so, I have trouble observing this day without looking and listening to the city, our American cities, this city. It seems to me, that it's the least we can do - to thrill at the glory of the place, its beauty, its strength, its grace and its hope, and if necessary to weep at its despair and tragedy.

There is in this city a lethal combination of forces which is creating an urban problem so large we can no longer even see the entire picture. Poverty - drugs - violence. Public housing - crack - guns - despair - gangs - assault rifles. And beneath it all, what appears for all the world like a massive, uncondi-tional political surrender, the Federal Government hands urban problems to the state. The state is broke and hands them on to the city itself. At all three levels people get elected by promising to cut spending and never raise taxes, looking at the private sector which responds with some justification that its primary business is business, commerce, not urban violence, education and health care, which leaves the churches. We have refused to think in new ways about drugs and gangs and guns. But there are not enough police, not enough courtrooms, not enough jails to begin to win the vaunted war we declared and have al-ready lost. Because of poverty - despair - and drugs, an enter-prising child in Cabrini Green (public housing project) will look out at the world and make some basic decisions. In Camden,
Time said, and it is true here, "An eight-year-old 'watcher'
on a bicycle, keeping a look out for police, earns $50 a day. A twelve-year-old can earn twice that much making a few deliveries; a carrier earns $400 for the trip to the next major city."

And so on the day our Lord wept over the blindness of the city the least we can do is make sure that we see what has become of us.

And homelessness; Dr. Lewis Thomas, former head of the Sloane Kettering Cancer Clinic and popular author wrote that "a society can be judged by the way it treats its most disadvan-taged, its least beloved, its mad. As things now stand, we must be judged a poor lot, and it is time to mend our ways." [Late Night Thoughts in Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony, p. 100]

On April 1, the Tribune said bluntly, "Today marks a moral low point for Illinois government. Forty thousand of the state's most destitute people are being cut loose from the smallest, most basic form of public assistance."

We could, of course, do it better. We could be better. We could be a city that cares for its least, that shelters its home-less, that tends to its sick and educates its children. But it will require a new way of thinking. And it will require sacri-fice and money; and if we know anything from our own pathetic history it is that there are no quick fixes, including turning this beautiful city into the gambling capital of the Midwest. It's not just the tragedy and pathos and crime and prostitution and ugliness which follows it wherever it goes, regardless of what the experts testify. It is that, of course, but what is reason to weep today is the suggestion that we have a way to fix our city which will not cost us anything, will require no sacri-fice at all - other than the sacrifices of those who play, 60% of whom are always, everywhere, the poor.

So today, may we who come here to observe the parade, see the city and hear the city and if need be weep for the city.

And the other thing about this day is that by coming to the city, Jesus showed where religion is to be focused. Last week I attended a forum on "Faith and Work," how a personal religious faith affects the worlds of work and politics and leisure and family. The results of a recent survey were shared and dis-cussed. For most people in the mainline churches religious faith affects family life, but has very little to do with either their work or politics or their leisure. Chicago Theological Seminary scholar, Susan Thistlethwaite, observed that Christians have not always agreed that religion ought to have political, social or vocational impact. There has always been, she said, a suspicion among sectarians that when faith and politics, faith and the world of work meet, faith is diulted.

Professor Glenn Tinder wrote about The Political Meaning of Christianity and observed similarly, that we want to keep spirit-uality separate from the more complex areas of our lives. And he concludes that there is a very basic theological error in that. On this day we celebrate our Lord's coming to the city - not the retreat center, monastery, cloister, but the noisy, wonderful, tragic, glorious heart of the city. We celebrate his coming to the Temple and turning it around and opening its door to the poor, sick, blind, outcast.

Somewhere in each of us, I suppose, is a wish that he hadn't done that; a desire to keep our God safely transcendent, to keep our Lord in the pleasant, rolling hills of Galilee, keep our won religion confined to the church sanctuary on Sunday morning. And that might be a tenable position to assume except for the fact that he rode into the city.

In that sense, it's bad news I suppose. But, as is often the case with religion, it is also the good news because it means that God's commitment to us is absolute, and God's coming into the center of our lives is relentless and determined and strong. There is on that road down from the Mount of Olives not only despair but great hope [see Buechner, op. cit.] - both

the des-perate shouts of an oppressed people, but also the hosannas of those who are sustained by hope in God which is always at the same time, hope for the future. There is in his weeping both grief and also deep love for the city. And there is in the whole gesture, the whole panorama of this day, a promise that Jesus Christ comes to the city, our city - redemptively, decisively, creatively, hopefully - and to your heart and mine.

His love for and commitment to the human city includes you and me in our individuality and privateness. He comes to meet us, to listen to us, to receive our hosannas, to teach us - but also to forgive us, to heal us, and to accept us in places we thought ourselves to be unacceptable and in ways we thought were impossible.

He comes - where you live and move and have your being - to be your Lord, your Savior, your friend - in your heart of hearts, where you love and hope and dream, where you store the memories of your failures and betrayals and your victories and highest joys. He comes to the city.

Did you notice, as I did for the first time actually, the words his disciples chant along the road:

> "Blessed is the king...
> Peace in heaven,
> and glory in the highest heaven!"

Those words are strikingly similar to words the angels sang at his birth.

> "Glory to God in the highest heaven
> and on earth peace."

That's what this day is about. It is what he is about. And it is what we must be about now.

> Glory to God among us, riding on a donkey.
> Glory to God for showing us how to love.
> Glory to him and showed us how to live
> courageously and die faithfully.

And peace - here - in this city - in your heart and mine.

> "Blessed is the king
> who comes in the name of the Lord!"